Files made public

Washington Post UPI Jan 25 78

Files Show FBI Concluded Ray Financed Escape by Stealing

United Press International

The FBI concluded that James Earl Ray financed his escape from Memphis, Tenn., after killing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. through a series of petty robberies and was not bankrolled by co-conspirators, FBI files disclosed yesterday.

Internal FBI documents, amassed in the largest manhunt in history, disclosed that Ray was planning a flight to South Africa or Rhodesia a few days before his arrest by Scotland Yard police officers at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8, 1968, two months after King was gunned down on a motel balcony in Memphis.

The FBI reports—made available exclusively to UPI under the Freedom of Information Act—also showed a strong streak of racism and pro-Nazi feelings may have led Ray to assassinate the man who most symbolized black refusal to accept anything but equal status in America.

Just a few weeks before King's murder, Ray and a companion, Charles Stein, drove from Los Angeles to New Orleans and back. In the course of that trip, Ray gave vent to his racial feelings.

There has been speculation that Ray, a drifter who had spent most of his life in jail, had been bankrolled by forces eager to silence King.

As recently as June 27, 1974, however, the FBI files showed, the bureau concluded it could find "nothing to indicate that Ray ever received any large sum of money from anyone, and what we know of his living habits both before and after the murder would indicate that he lived on a very limited amount of money.

"We do not know the source of even the smallest amount of money possessed by Ray, but since we know him to have robbed a bank in England after fleeing to that country, it is a reasonable presumption that Ray committed robberies in the United States during the time he was a fugitive," the FBI said.

FBI picture of James Ray

S.F. Examiner 1/25/78

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Martin Luther King's friends believed there must have been a conspiracy to kill him — and even James Earl Ray said he had an accomplice — but the FBI privately decided Ray killed King with help from no one.

In the largest manhunt in history, the bureau decided Ray had both the racial hatred to provide a motive and the means to finance an escape that carried him to Mexico two days after the slaying and to Portugal and Britain within five weeks. But the source of Ray's funds remains a mystery.

The FBI, trying to question everyone in contact with Ray in the year between his escape from prison and the April 4, 1968, slaying, could find no one who plotted murder with him.

The FBI even investigated reports that the motive for the murder was revenge for "cuckoldry" — that Ray was hired by a husband jealous of the civil rights leader.

An FBI memo dated Dec. 18, 1975, cited a column by Jack Anderson, who claimed he was told by J. Edgar Hoover in 1968 that "the motive behind the murder of King was cuckoldry and that the assassin apparently had been hired by a jealous husband."

Anderson identified the man only as the husband of a Los Angeles woman friendly with King.

The bureau's internal files on the King case, compiled by 3,075 agents and totaling more than 40,000 pages, were made available to United Press International in compliance with the Freedom of Information Act.

They portray a small-time robber who charged fellow prisoners 50 percent interest on loans to finance their poker games, who "mainlained" amphetamines and barbiturates.

His racism came through in a remark he made to a friend, Charles Stein, who drove him from Los Angeles to New Orleans and back.

"If Negroes want to be free, they should go North or West," Stein quoted Ray. "If they stay in the South, they should be willing to be slaves."

The FBI acknowledged in a memo that it failed to establish how Ray raised the money for the $1,995 white Mustang in which he escaped or the $134.95 for the .30-06 caliber Remington pump rifle with $74.60 telescopic sight used to kill King, or the money to go first to Mexico, then to Canada, where he bought a roundtrip ticket to London.

But the special agent-in-charge of the Memphis bureau told headquarters on June 27, 1974, that agents found "nothing to indicate that Ray ever received any large sum of money from anyone, and what we know of his living habits both before and after the murder would indicate that he lived on a very limited amount of money.

"We do not know the source of even the smallest amount of money possessed by Ray, but since we know him to have robbed a bank in England after fleeing to that country, it is a reasonable presumption that Ray committed robberies during the time he was a fugitive," the agent said.

Ray also encouraged conspiracy plots when he stood in court on March 10, 1969, and changed his plea from innocent to guilty but said he could "not accept" the assertion of his own lawyers and the prosecution that no conspiracy existed.